

SKYWRITING

By

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Of thirty-eight
Women's Airforce Service Pilots killed in World War II,
only one is still missing.

In Memory of
Gertrude Tompkins Silver.

News is the first rough draft of history.
—Phillip Graham

(Excerpt)

“You look like hell,” Leni said, standing over the bed. “There’s a bruise the size of a grapefruit on your forehead. It’s yellow and blue, like a kid’s clay ball that’s all molded together.”

“Do you think I give a damn what it *looks* like?” Denis croaked.

“No, I don’t think you give a damn. I think you’re thoughtless, nasty, and rude.”

He lay with his arms outside the sheet, the drape covering and exposing his every hollow and ridge.

He said slowly, “Are you trying to be a writer? You can find better words. Try sullen, ill-tempered, morose, and splenetic. And you forgot abusive.” He closed his eyes.

“Cannon, I’ll try Shakespeare: ‘*Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight.*’” She tapped a cigarette from her pack and lit it with a quick flourish of her Zippo. She thought she saw a flicker of amusement in his possibly blue eyes. She couldn’t be sure what color they were.

The exchange seemed to absorb the awkwardness in the room. She stepped closer to the bed. “Gorski said to give you these.” She proffered all five editions of the morning’s *Post*.

“When I’m up to it,” he said weakly. He blinked his eyes.

She circled the bed warily, placing the newspapers on the nightstand.

“Would you like to know what’s on the front page of the street edition, Cannon?”

“Do I look like I could read the paper?”

“No. You look like a horse kicked you. But let me rephrase that. I believe *I* will read the paper to you.” She rattled the paper as she opened it. “First the headlines: ‘Mussolini Dead; Hanged by Partisans with His Mistress.’”

“You don’t have to do this.” He stared at the ceiling.

“Tell that to Gorski.” She snapped the leaves of the paper flat. “‘Patton Calls for Fight Against Reds Once Germany Is Finished.’”

She mused more to herself, “I wonder what Truman’s going to say about that? FDR is probably spinning in his grave.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the thirty-second president of the United States, had died on April 12, just ten days earlier.

Denis lay unresponsive.

“Okay. This is a funny one. Ready for laughs, Cannon? ‘Aborigines Attack Lawmen with Kangaroo Tails.’ You like that one?” She glanced at him when she detected a flicker of interest.

“Headline’s a dangling modifier,” he grumped. “Do the lawmen have tails?”

“Hey, blame someone else for a change. I didn’t write that head.” She snapped the paper. “It’s an Associated Press story, datelined Alice Springs, Australia.

Aborigines attacked three policemen with frozen kangaroo tails in a remote Northern Territory town and then ate the evidence, a court was told Friday.

Senior Constable Marcus McCallister told Alice Springs Court that three officers were attacked by fifteen aborigines carrying frozen kangaroo tails bought at a local store. The officers were not seriously injured. Six men were charged with assault. But a police spokesman said the kangaroo tails won’t be introduced as evidence because it is believed they were eaten by the aborigines after the attack.

McCallister said police believe the attack stemmed from an earlier attempt by police to move a man sitting in the middle of a highway in an apparent suicide bid.

He nodded, eyes half-closed. She thought she saw a softening of the lines at the corners of his mouth.

“You are one quirky bastard,” she said, staring at this strange man as she lowered the paper.

“Stop using that kind of language, Burke. Were you raised by sailors?”

“How dare you impugn my...” She had almost said “family.” A slip could be dangerous. She had worked hard at erasing who she was.

She remembered the first day he called her to his desk. He kept his eyes on the story she had written.

His first words to her were, “It’s not bad. It’s terrible.”

She gathered herself tensely, brushing her hair over her ear and rolling her shoulders as she always did when she was nervous.

“Okay. Tell me why.”

“Never start a story with the day of the week. Listen to what you wrote: ‘*On Wednesday, April 29, a piano concerto will be held at the Methodist Church at 210 East 200 South to raise funds.*’”

“How should it be?” she said.

“The story isn’t about Wednesday. It’s about a piano concerto. Start with that. *A piano concerto to raise funds for the Methodist Church at 210 E. 200 South will be conducted Wednesday, April 29.* At what time? You left out the time. Should folks just show up in the morning and wait around until the concert starts, whenever that is? And why are they trying to raise funds? What are they for? Also, you cannot *hold* a concert. Tell me, can you hold a concert?” He held up cupped hands, as if inviting her to sip the imaginary acid held in them.

“You don’t have to be s-so nasty a-about it!” she snapped back, her feelings hurt. She was doing her best to live up to her new self-description, *writer*, and the bastard was taking it away from her. Not only that, she noticed he’d caused a touch of her stutter to return.

“Pain is a fabulous teacher,” he said, balling up the copy and tossing it into the trash bin. Rewrite it.”

Later they battled over the use of the word *that*. He argued it could always be deleted. She argued that the word was needed for the grace of a sentence.

“You understand the war has limited how much newsprint we get? Every word counts. Your writing should be spare and concise. You’re not writing short stories; you are writing news,” Denis said.

The next day she got a memo from Cannon:

I consider that that “that” that worries us so much should be forgotten. Rats desert a sinking ship. Thats infest a sinking newspaper.

(With thanks to James Thurber.)

—Cannon

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